



(Chinese Muslim calligraphy: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.")

Seek Knowledge In China

Thinking Beyond the Abrahamic Box

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The mere mention of “Chinese Muslims” draws an astonished blank from many people: “You mean there are Muslims in China?” Even those familiar with the Islamic world and conscious of the existence of Chinese Muslims are often aware only of the Turkic Uighurs of Xinjiang, China’s vast northwestern province in Central Asia. This paper focuses exclusively on the history and cultural formation of the largest population of Muslims in the People’s Republic of China, the Hui people. Unlike the Uighurs, the Hui are culturally Chinese and virtually indistinguishable from the Han community, who make up China’s billion-strong majority. The Hui have lived for centuries within the borders of the Great Wall in eastern China where the major cities are located, and they constitute *the* Chinese Muslims proper.



On occasion, the Hui express frustration at being largely unknown or confused with their Uighur co-religionists. Élisabeth Allès quotes a Western visitor to China who observed a Chinese-looking man in a white skullcap outside the city's principal mosque and said to him: "This building has the look of a pagoda yet is a mosque. How strange! The Muslims in China are the Turkic populations of Xinjiang!" The man replied: "Look at me. I am not a Uighur and do not belong to any Turkic-speaking population. I speak Chinese. I am from Beijing. I am a Muslim. I am a Hui."¹

The Hui are among the largest of China's many religious and ethnic minorities. Their exact numbers are difficult to determine and greatly disputed.² Of all Chinese minorities, they are indisputably the most widely dispersed. They live in every province of China, even the coastal islands, and are almost evenly divided between urban and rural areas. They tend to concentrate around local mosques, giving rise to the popular Hui saying: "[We] are widely scattered in small concentrations." For centuries, the Hui enjoyed considerable independence and economic strength, reinforced by a self-confident indigenous Islamic culture, social solidarity, and a profound sense of being simultaneously Muslim and Chinese.

The Muslims of China have played an important role in the country's history, contributing to military, administrative, and economic life. The most celebrated Hui in Chinese history is probably Zheng He, the renowned admiral of China's Imperial Star Fleet from 1405 to 1433. With more than one hundred massive ships and thirty thousand men under his command, he sailed to over forty lands. With good reason, many Chinese regard Zheng He as the epitome of good luck. Gavin Menzies argues in his controversial best seller, 1421: *The Year China Discovered America*, that Zheng He's voyages brought him to the New World more than seventy years be-

fore Columbus. During 2005, the six-hundredth anniversary of the first sailing of Zheng He's fleet was commemorated throughout the Chinese-speaking world.

The Prophet Muhammad reportedly drew attention to China's uniqueness as a source of knowledge. A number of well-regarded Islamic sources relate that he said: "Seek knowledge even if in China, for the seeking of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim."³ Traditional Muslim scholars questioned the report's authenticity, but it has long occupied a central place in the Muslim consciousness and remains one of the most well known sayings of the Prophet, there being hardly a Muslim anywhere who does not know it.

Most Muslims have regarded this Hadith as a figure of speech urging them to seek knowledge in earnest even if it leads to the ends of the earth. For the Muslims in China, who literally lived at the ends of the earth, the Prophet's saying took on special significance. It was regarded as immeasurable homage to their homeland as a unique wellspring of knowledge and wisdom.

Despite Islam's importance in China for more than a millennium, few scholars, whether Muslim or not, devoted attention to its study before modern times. Nineteenth-century Christian missionaries were among the first to undertake serious academic study of the Hui and to bring them to the attention of Western scholarship. Christianity had first entered China shortly after the advent of Christ. It ultimately died out, hardly leaving a trace. The missionaries desired better results. The Hui intrigued them because they had thrived in China for more than a millennium. Recognizing Islam as a kindred faith, the missionaries believed that study of the Hui experience might reveal the secret of their continuity.⁴

Recent scholarship has also focused on the historical capacity of the Hui Muslims to flourish in a

distinctively non-Muslim civilization. Dru Gladney asserts that the Hui experience is a standing refutation of Samuel Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations. From Huntington's point of view, there is little room for diverse civilizations to live in harmony and seek a common future. Although the Hui and Han have not always lived in harmony, the greater part of the history of Islam in China provides a notable exception to Huntington's theory.⁵

The Development of Islam in China

The history of Islam in China stretches over five major imperial dynasties to the foundation of the modern Chinese nation-state. Early Muslim tombstones and Chinese historical archives bear witness to a Muslim presence in China from the seventh century, shortly after the advent of Islam. Muslim diplomatic contact with China may have begun as early as the caliphate of Uthman, shortly after the death of the Prophet.⁶ Official contacts between the Muslim world and China continued on and off during the heyday of the early Islamic (Umayyad and Abbasid) empires from the seventh century to roughly the eleventh.

In 755, the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur sent Muslim soldiers to China to help the Tang emperor suppress a rebellion. Afterwards, the emperor encouraged the soldiers to remain in his service, settle in China, and take Chinese wives. This decision began a centuries-long tradition of Muslim soldiers serving the Chinese emperor. In the Hui collective memory, Chinese Islam owes its origins to this imperial policy. The actual history of Islam's development in China is multifaceted, but the early association of Chinese Muslims with imperial service was an important part of the process and gave the Hui a profound sense of legitimacy and self-esteem. In the process of cultural genesis, the orientation of the first generations often defines future generations. To this day, military service remains a preferred profession among Chinese Muslims.

Military service was not, however, the sole vehicle by which Muslims came to China. During the first centuries, commerce and trade were the primary avenues by which Islam entered China. Early Muslim merchants played a vital role in the Chinese economy. Their status in China was based on formal pacts between the Chinese emperor and Muslim rulers abroad. Thus, like Muslim soldiers in the emperor's service, Muslim merchants enjoyed official legitimacy and considerable prestige and could travel freely.

Muslim merchants in China were not free to live wherever they chose. Instead, they were restricted to special conclaves, where they enjoyed considerable autonomy. Their communities were generally affluent, reflecting the prosperity of Muslim trade. Houses were centered around large central mosques, constructed with official permission. Chinese authorities appointed special governing committees of elders, who were usually Muslims and bore honorable official titles. In addition to overseeing the internal affairs of the Muslim community, the governing committees served as liaisons between the Muslims and state authorities.

In the early period, Muslims in China were classified as "foreign guests." The status could last for generations. Early records speak of Muslim "China-born guests" even after the fifth generation. Despite the fact that Muslims intermarried with Chinese women and became proficient in local dialects, communal segregation preserved their foreign identity and retarded the development of a fully indigenous Chinese Muslim culture.

In the early thirteenth century, the Mongols conquered China, established the Mongol (Yuan) Dynasty, and altered forever the situation of Chinese Muslims. During their conquests in the Muslim world, the Mongol hordes razed many great centers of Islamic civilization in Central Asia, Iran, and the eastern Arab world. Although they massacred en-

tire populations, the Mongols spared select groups of Muslim craftsmen, young women, and children, many of whom were forcefully marched to China. This practice brought about massive demographic changes in China and increased the Chinese Muslim population by possibly as much as two or three million. Ironically, the Mongol invasions that devastated Muslim populations in much of the traditional Islamic world engineered an unprecedented expansion of the Muslim presence in China.

In China, the Mongols pursued a conciliatory policy toward their captive Muslim population and won their loyalty. Even more than earlier Chinese emperors, the Mongol overlords helped consolidate their rule in China by relying on Muslims as auxiliary troops, employing them as governmental officials, and using them in other capacities. Sai Dianji (al-Sayyid al-Ajall), who was originally from Bukhara in Central Asia, became one of the most highly regarded Muslim officials. When Marco Polo visited China in the thirteenth century, Sai Dianji was the imperial Minister of Finance. Later, Sai Dianji was appointed Governor of Yunnan Province, where he promoted Confucianist culture and introduced the Islamic religion.

Under Mongol rule, imperial intervention fostered an unparalleled cultural presence for Muslims in China. In contrast to earlier dynasties, the Mongol emperors sought the full incorporation of Muslims into Chinese society. In order to uphold the dynasty, Muslims were dispersed throughout China and settled in strategic areas, rendering the earlier policy of communal segregation obsolete. The Mongols encouraged Muslim migration to China, which led to an influx of notables, scientists, and scholars. The vibrant community of Chinese Muslims that emerged helped to link China to the outside world, ultimately creating intercontinental networks of trade and commerce that prefigured present-day globalism.⁷

In the fourteenth century, the Ming Dynasty, which was ethnically Chinese, supplanted Mongol rule. The Ming period constitutes one of the greatest epochs of Chinese history. In reaction to Mongol rule, the Ming rulers were generally hostile to foreigners and vigorously asserted Chinese supremacy. To the good fortune of China's Muslim population, which had taken on a distinctively Chinese character under the Mongols, the Ming Dynasty did not look upon them as foreigners and continued the policy of utilizing Muslims to consolidate and buttress imperial power. Muslims played their traditional role as officers, soldiers, and administrators. They also partook actively in higher Chinese culture, including literature and philosophy.

The Ming gave Chinese Muslim culture a thoroughly indigenous stamp. It was under their rule that "Hui" became the standard appellation for Chinese Muslims. The actual meaning of the name is open to debate; it is not unlikely, however, that "Hui" initially designated the Central Asian region of Khwarezm, from which an exceptionally large number of the ancestral Hui originated. Chinese surnames were a state honor and symbol of status. They were conferred officially and could not be taken merely by personal choice. During the Ming period, Chinese names became the rule among the Hui. The Hui had ceased to be Muslims in China and now became Chinese Muslims.

Ming rule lasted almost three hundred years. In 1644, it was brought to an end by the Manchurians, a warlike, nomadic people from China's northeastern expanses. The Manchurians established the Qing (pronounced "ching") Dynasty, which lasted until 1912. Hui culture flourished during the early Manchurian period. The dynasty espoused a benign policy of "equal benevolence" toward the Hui and the Han majority. Hui officers and soldiers continued to serve in the military, and Chinese Muslims were appointed,

as before, to significant positions in the imperial bureaucracy.

But the period of Manchurian rule, especially its final decades, was among the most difficult periods of Hui history. Peaceful coexistence between the Han and the Hui was replaced by communal violence in many parts of China. The bloodshed peaked in the middle nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The conflict has yet to be adequately studied and is not sufficiently understood. The discord ran mostly along Han-Hui ethnic and religious fault lines, but there were also new ideological divisions within the Hui community itself, which repeatedly pitted the Hui against each other.

The Manchurian dynasty is often seen as the major instigator of the Han-Hui conflict. Officially, the Manchurians were seldom stringently anti-Hui, but, in practice, discrimination against the Hui predominated under their rule. Relationships between the Hui and Han were strained, ultimately leading to communal strife and open rebellion. Blame for the communal trouble does not seem to rest primarily on the central government but on poor provincial administration and the breakdown of central authority, which left large numbers of the Hui at the mercy of local Han officials and landholders, who often flouted the directives of the emperor.

As a rule, the bloodshed sprang from local conflicts of interest that were ignited by disputes over matters like land ownership and intermarriage. Paradoxically, the discord came at a time when the Hui had become an integral element of Chinese culture. According to some, the fact that the Han and Hui had come to have a similar socio-economic status was a major reason for the conflict, since it put both communities in direct competition with each other, which generally had not been the case before.

From the 1780s until the 1930s, there were repeated outbreaks of communal violence between

the Han and the Hui, especially in the northwestern and southwestern provinces. Members of both groups lived in insecurity and constant fear. The Hui were not passive victims but retaliated in kind. As the clashes spread, they took on the semblance of civil war and may be compared to the Hindu-Muslim communal violence that followed the partition of India in 1947.

Han-Hui carnage peaked between 1855 and 1878. The Hui suffered the greatest losses and, in some regions, faced the threat of genocide. One of the worst bloodbaths took place between 1862 and 1878 in Gansu, a northern province with a large Hui population. The entire region was depopulated; its original population of fifteen million was decimated to one million. One person in every ten was killed, two-thirds of them Hui; almost everyone else fled as refugees.

The Nationalist Party overthrew the Manchurians in 1912 and established the Republic of China under Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-Sen), “the father of modern China.” The first years of the Republic were chaotic, and Sun Yixian did not win effective control for twelve years. Although Sun Yixian ultimately adopted a benevolent policy toward the Hui, occasional outbreaks of Han-Hui violence lasted until the 1930s, when the Republic finally consolidated central authority, which was soon disrupted by the invasion of imperialist Japan and renewed civil war.

In 1949, Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-Tung) established the People’s Republic of China, a Marxist state antagonistic to all religion, whether indigenous Chinese, Islamic, or Christian. Mao made early concessions to the Hui and designated them as one of China’s principal minorities. Like other religious communities, the Hui suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and ended with Mao’s death in 1976. The Red Guards, the backbone of the Cultural Revolution, destroyed temples, mosques, and churches.

There were also attacks against the Hui themselves, whose continued existence in China as a distinctive religious minority became precarious.

The Cultural Revolution consolidated Mao's personal power vis-à-vis political rivals in the Communist Party but weakened central authority and spread political chaos. After Mao's death, moderates within the Chinese Communist Party took control of the People's Republic, abandoned Mao's radical policies and improved relations with the Hui. The primary concern of the central government became economic development, and the Communist Party recognized the potential value of the Hui, especially in foreign relations with the Muslim world. Mosques were rebuilt, and permission was given to construct new ones and establish Islamic schools. The People's Republic gave extensive publicity to its accommodation of the Hui, which attracted international delegations from the Muslim world and strengthened diplomatic ties.

The history of Islam in China began under auspicious conditions and flourished for nearly a thousand years. Will the legacy of Chinese Islam return to its former course or end in tragedy? Nothing is more traumatic than irrational violence. It not only affects individuals but may also disrupt the social-psychological balance of entire peoples. Protracted internal discord can alter or destroy earlier cultural formations and entire collective mind-sets. One of the dangers that the Hui face today in the aftermath of the communal violence of the last two centuries and the Cultural Revolution is the weakening of their former cultural synthesis, which made them an integral part of China.

Over the centuries, strong central authority in China repeatedly supported the interests of the Hui and played an active role in the cultivation of symbiotic relationships that fostered mutual benefit. The darker episodes of Hui history coincided with poor administration and the breakdown of central author-

ity. Hopefully, the political stability of modern China is a good omen and bodes a better future for the Hui.

Interpretive Control and Hui Self-Definition

Historically, China was called the "Middle Kingdom." The name reflected more than the Chinese conception of geography. It expressed belief that the Chinese tradition was based on harmony with Heaven and Earth—the two great metaphysical realities—making China the Sacred Land and placing it at the center of the cosmos.

Islam could not flourish in China without tempering its Semitic character and creating a respectful relationship toward China's ancient civilization. The Chinese regarded their society as the epitome of human development. Foreign peoples were looked upon as barbarians, and the Chinese were not readily open to alien values and beliefs. It was hardly to Islam's advantage to present itself as an alien faith. To succeed in the Sacred Land, Muslims had to demonstrate their compatibility with the Chinese ethos.

Hui scholars delved into the Islamic tradition, found resources that enabled them to think beyond the Abrahamic box, and discovered common ground with Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Buddhism. Dual mastery of the Islamic and Chinese traditions permitted Muslim scholars to take interpretive control over how they and their religion would be defined in China. Their accomplishment laid the foundation of a lasting indigenous Muslim culture, which fostered self-esteem and a dynamic spirit for the Hui as a Muslim people in the context of an ancient non-Islamic civilization.

There is a long-standing convention in Western scholarship to speak of Chinese Islam as a "sinicization" [making Chinese] of "orthodox" Islamic faith and practice. This convention creates a hegemonic discourse⁸ that reinforces assumptions about Islam as a monolithic cultural system. It also marginalizes the

value of the Hui cultural genius. A “heterodox, sinicized” Islam is questionable even in Hui eyes and has little instructive value for others.

The notion of the sinicization of Islam in China is based on a false preconception of Islam and its attitude toward indigenous cultures. It presumes that the only valid (“orthodox”) expression of Islam is Middle Eastern. In reality, neither Muslim societies in history nor classical Islamic law produced uniform patterns of cultural expression. Muslims have always formulated distinctive indigenous forms of Islamic cultural expression wherever they went, and the process was encouraged by Islam’s religious law.⁹ Regional cultural receptivity produced a marvelous mosaic of unity in diversity still in evidence today. Islam’s inherent cultural genius created a global Islamic civilization, which spread its peacock’s tail from China to the Atlantic.¹⁰

Mosque architecture is one of the most conspicuous pieces of the great cultural mosaic, and the traditional Chinese mosque beautifully illustrates Islam’s capacity for expressing unity in diversity, namely, the overarching unity of Islamic belief in the regional diversity of Chinese culture. An Imam of the Beijing central mosque said of the Hui people: “Hui Muslims are just like this mosque. On the outside, we look altogether Chinese. On the inside, we are [Muslims], Pure and Real.” The Hui cultivated both Chinese and Arabic calligraphy. What they wrote in Arabic was translated into Chinese and written in traditional styles of Chinese calligraphy. Often, the Hui used Chinese calligraphy by itself. Upon entering a Chinese mosque, it is common to find a prominent wall with the bold Chinese words: The Primordial Religion from the Foundation of Heaven (*Kai Tian Gu Jiao*).

The Hui use of the Chinese language and indigenous cultural forms to find a common ground of understanding has ample support in the Islamic tradi-

tion. The Prophet taught: “Honor people according to the eminence of their stations.”¹¹ Imam Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and the fourth caliph of Islam, said: “Speak to people in terms familiar to them. Would you like to cause falsehood to be attributed to God and His Messenger?”¹² Ibn Mas‘ud, a close Companion of the Prophet, echoed the same sentiment: “Never will you speak words to people that their intellects fail to understand but that it will be a trial for some among them.”¹³ The Hui cultural synthesis enabled Muslims in China to honor the eminence of the Chinese tradition at its best and speak in words that were readily intelligible and reputable within the Chinese worldview.

To communicate effectively with the non-Muslim Chinese, it was necessary for the Hui to acknowledge Chinese cultural conventions and reach beyond the customary expressions of Semitic religion. In doing this, the Hui discovered a new symbolic universe rooted both in Islam and Eastern religion and philosophy that was readily intelligible to the Chinese. The idea of a personal God, resurrection, and Day of Judgment, for example, were alien to Chinese thought. Hui scholarship cultivated a concise and sophisticated idiom and carefully chose suitable Chinese analogies to bridge the gap between the two very different mind-sets. Effective cross-cultural communication was not only essential for communicating with the non-Muslim Chinese, it was necessary for reaching many members of the Hui community who had been schooled in the Chinese tradition and were unfamiliar with customary Islamic discourse. Had the Hui failed in the task of building cross-cultural bridges, they would have relegated themselves and their faith to obscurity.

Radically different worldviews were not the only obstacle the Hui faced. The Chinese script created problems of its own. To begin with, the transliteration of Arabic words was virtually impossible.

The Chinese writing system is not phonetic and uses word pictures, symbolic ideograms. Pronunciation of the ideograms varies from one region to another. It was possible to select ideograms that might generally be read with sounds approximating Arabic words, but such transliterations were rarely adequate, for Chinese sounds rarely correspond to those of Arabic. The most acceptable transliteration of “Muhammad,” for example, required four ideograms and was pronounced *Mu Han Me De*. The use of so many ideograms for a single word was inelegant and cumbersome. There was an additional risk that the ideograms chosen, however much they approximated the desired Arabic sounds, might have inappropriate symbolic associations in Chinese.

The Hui circumvented the problem of transliteration by innovating meaningful Chinese renditions of Arabic words. They referred to God as the One, the Real, the Real One, the Real Lord, and the Real Ruler. The expressions corresponded to Islamic names of the Abrahamic personal God but did not clash with Chinese tradition, which regarded references to a personal God as anthropomorphic. Ancient Chinese tradition had once affirmed a personal God, who was called the Supreme and the Supreme Sovereign.¹⁴ Later Chinese thought, however, preferred non-personal names such as the Highest Principle. A noted Hui scholar acknowledged the earlier ancient Chinese tradition of a personal God, which he regarded as a remnant of primordial Prophetic religion, but used language for God that would not clash with the understanding of his contemporaries:

Our Pure and Real religion [Islam], the true faith, arose in the West [the Middle East] and came to China over the years, beginning from the time of the Tang Dynasty. Our recognition of the Real Lord and Creator, which came from the first human being, had not yet been lost in China. Investigate the essence of this matter. Return to the

source. By this, you too may take hold of the correct doctrine of [Islam], the Pure and the Real.

The Hui referred to the Prophet Muhammad not by an awkward transliteration of his Arabic name but as the Chief Servant, the Sage, the Utmost Sage, and the Human Ultimate. They called the unicity of God (*tawhid*) Practicing One and Returning to the One. The Qur’an was referred to as the Classic, which put it in the same category as the revered and sacred books (called “classics”) of ancient China. It was also known as the Heavenly Classic and the Real Classic of the True Mandate. The direction of prayer toward Mecca (*qibla*) was called the Direction of Heaven. The sensory world (*‘alam al-shahada*) was termed the Color World; its counterpart, the world of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) was given the name of the Colorless World. The Garden was referred to as the Heaven Country and the Ultimate Happiness. Hell was Earth Prison and Earth Prohibited. (Both terms were based on the Chinese conception of Heaven and Earth as higher and lower metaphysical realities.)

It would have been culturally problematic to call Islam “submission” or to transliterate it, producing the awkward form *Yi Si Lan Jiao* [the religion of Islam]. Hui scholarship chose to call Islam the Religion of the Pure and the Real [*Qing Zhen Jiao*]. The words expressed the essence of Islam, avoided foreign associations, and emphasized core Chinese values, declaring Islam to be a cognate faith. The testimony of faith (*kalimat al-shahada*) was called the Very Words of the Pure and Real.

The Pure and the Real were ancient Chinese symbols of the sacred. An early Chinese etymological dictionary traces their meaning to the expression: “The Pure and the Real lacks desire. It is everything that cannot change.” The Pure (*qing*; pronounced “ching”) stood for inward and outward purity. It connoted lucidity of belief and thought and the lack of selfish motives. The Real (*zhen*) was a name for the

Creative Principle (God) and corresponded to Chinese notions of the eternal truths that underlie the cosmic order (*sunnat Allah fi al-khalq*).

As Dru Gladney observes, by calling Islam the Pure and the Real faith, the Hui successfully appropriated for themselves the indigenous symbols of the sacred, which placed them strategically at the center of the Chinese symbolic universe and “turned the tables of Chinese society.” Calling Islam the Pure and the Real is an illustration of interpretative control at its best. The Pure and Real became the bedrock of indigenous Chinese Muslim culture. It played a fundamental role in forming a reciprocal Chinese-Islamic identity and enabled the Hui to gain the best of two religious traditions and the civilizations they inspired.¹⁵

Thinking Beyond the Abrahamic Box

Two Hui scholars of the early Manchurian period—Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi—are widely regarded as the culmination of Chinese Muslim thought. Both were trained in Arabic and Persian and studied classical Islamic curricula. They memorized the Qur’an at early ages and mastered the Hanafi school of law, which Chinese Muslims almost invariably follow. They were also trained in Islamic theology, philosophy, and metaphysical Sufism.

Wang Daiyu was born in the late sixteenth century and received an exclusively Islamic education in his youth but was not tutored in the Chinese classics. Once he had attained full manhood and good standing as a Muslim scholar, he came to regard his ignorance of the Chinese tradition as “stupidity and smallness,” because it was impossible for him to reach those around him who were educated in the Chinese tradition. He set to work earnestly to remedy this deficiency and did so after years of intense study. Liu Zhi belonged to the subsequent generation. His father, Liu Sanjie, also a noted Muslim scholar, admired

Wang Daiyu and was determined that Liu Zhi follow in his footsteps. Liu Zhi’s father made arrangements for his son’s simultaneous education in the Islamic and Chinese traditions from an early age.

The work of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi was not apologetic. Its purpose was simply to explain the nature of Islam, not to convince Chinese society of its truths or defend it from their criticisms. Their primary audience was not non-Muslims but fellow Hui Muslims who were trained in the classical Chinese tradition and lacked direct access to Arabic or Persian mediums. This class of the Hui was substantially large and had imbibed a thoroughly Chinese worldview. Ordinary Hui scholars who lacked training in the Chinese tradition could hardly understand them and had little hope of having a positive effect on them.

The imagery, analogies, and modes of argumentation that Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi used were carefully chosen and finely honed. By speaking in words that the Chinese-educated Hui could readily understand, the two scholars indirectly attracted a second audience among the Chinese intelligentsia and religious scholars. Their books were printed and widely distributed among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. On one occasion, the abbot of the Iron Mountain Buddhist Monastery came to question Wang Daiyu and engaged him in debate for several days. In the end, the abbot acknowledged the superiority of Wang’s thought and became his disciple. Once Liu Zhi was asked about the nature of life and death from an Islamic point of view, he responded in a classically Chinese manner: “Life is also not life, and death is also not death.” The questioner requested further clarification: “Please give me one more word.” Liu Zhi replied: “Life is also not life, because it has death. Death is also not death, because it returns to life.”¹⁶

Both scholars acknowledged the integrity and essential truth of the Chinese tradition. As Tu Weiming stresses, they offered a vision of Islam that could be

“concretely realized in Confucian China.” They did not conceive of their faith as diametrically opposed to the Chinese tradition, rather they set out to explore both legacies in a “mutually beneficial joint venture” and “seamlessly” interwove core Islamic teachings in a “richly textured exposition of Confucian learning.”¹⁷

In keeping with Hui tradition, Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi did not question the fundamental conceptions of Chinese thought and accepted them as self-evidently true. But neither of them hesitated to find fault with the Chinese tradition wherever they believed it to be mistaken, and both confidently insisted on the superiority of Islamic teaching. Their criticisms were respectful and measured and never as stringent as those of dissenting Chinese schools of religion and philosophy against each other. Most importantly, Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi did not set out to deconstruct Chinese thought but to build upon it and demonstrate its harmony with core Islamic teachings. They based their synthesis of Islamic and Chinese thought on the core paradigm of Chinese metaphysics, the ontological unity of Heaven, Earth, and the Ten Thousand Things (the world of phenomena).

Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi elaborated a moral metaphysics meticulously rooted in both the Islamic and Chinese worldviews. In contrast to customary Chinese thought, they emphasized that only the unicity of the Creator could account for the uniformity of Heaven, Earth, and the Ten Thousand Things. They explained that to conceive only of the manifestations of the Dao (the inherent nature of things; *sunnat Allah*) as the sole force behind creation was like mistaking the painting for the painter or the mirror for the beautiful woman gazing into it.

In explaining the Islamic testimony of faith—“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger”—they explained that the two phrases “clarify the difference between the Real One and the Numerical One.” Thus, it also makes a distinction

between “the Real Lord and the Chief Servant” (the Prophet). Only on this basis, can human beings truly witness “the Unique One and the Numerical One.” The first exists utterly without dependence on phenomenal reality, and the second is utterly dependent on the first. The moral metaphysics of Islam, Wang explained, could only become the “fountainhead of clear virtue” once such a distinction was made. He asserted:

When clear virtue is clarified, there will be real knowledge. When there is real knowledge, the self will be known. When the self is known, the heart will be made true. When the heart is made true, intentions will be sincere. When intentions are sincere, words will be firm. When words are firm, the body will be cultivated. When the body is cultivated, the family will be regulated. When the family is regulated, the country will be governed.¹⁸

Both Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi regarded Confucianism, the official religion of China, as closer to the Islamic ethos than Daoism or Buddhism, although they readily acknowledged the universal truths in all traditions. Islam and Confucianism in their view, however, constituted a common culture. In a work entitled *The Philosophy of Arabia*, Liu Zhi offered a critique of the Daoist and Buddhist traditions that won the approval of the Confucianist vice-minister of the Chinese Board of Propriety. The latter remarked in his preface to the work that Liu Zhi had brought to light the way of the ancient Chinese sages. The vice-minister insisted: “Thus, although his book explains Islam, in truth it illuminates our Confucianism.”¹⁹

Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi focused on five central principles at the core of the Islamic and Chinese views of reality that made up the essential common ground between the two traditions. The scholars argued that each of the principles was implicit in the Islamic testimony of faith—“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God”—beginning with the affirmation of the one Absolute (God) and the

Perfect Human (the Prophet). Each of the five truths derived from this central truth and was a corollary of the others.

The first principle asserted that the oneness of God (the Absolute) confirmed that all existence is governed by a single, supreme Reality. The second principle affirmed the continuity of nature and the equilibrium and perfect harmony of Heaven, Earth, and the Ten Thousand Things. The third principle was that of the Middle Way (Prophetic law and the Sunna), which eliminated extremism and laid the foundation of a healthy individual and social life. Fourth was the primary humanistic component of the Middle Way: realization of the Perfect Human as the embodiment of the Middle Way. Although the Prophets (the Ultimate Sages) were the supreme embodiment of human perfection, the sages of old and the saints (*awliya'*) shared in this perfection and were also exemplary models. The final principle was the universal humanistic component of human perfection in general, the highest objective of both Islam and the Chinese tradition. It required adherence to the Middle Way, emulation of the Ultimate Sages, and reliance upon the intrinsic goodness (*fitra*) of the human soul.

The five shared principles and their implications for general well-being are alluded to in the words of Liu Zhi:

Only those who are Pure and Real can fully realize their nature.

Fully able to realize their nature, they can fully realize the nature of humanity.

Fully able to realize the nature of humanity, they can fully realize the nature of things.

Fully able to realize the nature of things, they can partake in the transformative and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth.

Being able to partake in the transformative and

nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form the third essential element in unison with Heaven and Earth.²⁰

Conclusion: The Hui Legacy & Learning To Be Human

Emphasis on the art of learning to be human as an essential part of religion is one of the greatest legacies of Hui Muslim culture for the world today. The advance of modern civilization, as Sachiko Murata stresses, has occurred at the expense of our humanity. The legacy of Islam in China emphasizes the importance of remembering what it means to be a human being. To paraphrase the words of Liu Zhi: We can only realize the true nature of things if we nourish our humanity, and only when we realize the true nature of things can we become part of the transformative and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth.

The quest toward becoming truly human requires awareness of and sympathy with the humanity of others. Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi illustrate the possibility of escaping one's cultural limitations and fully discovering the self and the other. To accomplish their task, they mastered the Abrahamic tradition and unlocked its resources. With equal earnestness, they delved into the non-Abrahamic traditions of China and discovered extensive common ground. In this feat, as Murata observes, Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi anticipated the course of action we must follow today if we are to discover our humanity and the humanity of others. Although we live in the information age, our knowledge of ourselves and others tends to be ill-informed and superficial. We too must cultivate knowledge of the human tradition—within and without the Abrahamic box—in the same earnestness and profundity.

As noted from the outset, the Hui experience in history provides a valuable example of long-lasting harmony between two very different civilizations. The

bleaker episodes of the Hui record are an exceptional break in more than a millennium of harmony. But Hui-Han communal violence took place at times of political disarray and the breakdown of central authority. The outbreaks emanated not from a clash of ideals and values but from regional conflicts of interest that were often inflamed by petty squabbles. The trouble occurred at a time when the Hui had become an integral part of Chinese culture at all class levels, yet, for that very reason, had come into direct socio-economic competition with the Han majority.

Han-Hui discord is a reminder that the internal harmony of civilizations cannot be taken for granted. The violence followed almost a millennium of peaceful coexistence and prefigured the domestic conflicts that have ripped apart nation-states and regional cultures in our time. In recent decades, many of the bloodiest clashes have not been between civilizations but within them as evidenced in the Rwanda genocide and inter-Muslim violence along ethnic and sectarian lines in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan. The strife runs along “fault lines” of class, ethnicity, and sectarian difference, which are accentuated and exploited for political gain but, as in the Han-Hui tragedy, results from the internal failures of civilizations, not their inherent natures.²¹

The history of Islam in China is especially relevant to the large and growing Muslim diasporas of the West. The humanistic traditions and democratic values of the West have allowed these communities to coexist in the United States, Canada, and Europe with the promise of a hopeful future. At the same time there are great obstacles to their sustained development. The geopolitical crisis between the West and the Islamic world over conflicting interests—especially oil—and growing antagonism between the two camps constitute, perhaps, the most serious of these problems. Unless the crisis is defused, it has the potential to revive old fears and irrational hatreds possibly leading to the destruction of the diaspora.

The Muslims who first came to China were ethnically diverse, but the diversity of Muslim minorities in the West is unparalleled in any previous Muslim society, and Western Muslim communities are dangerously divided along class and ethnic lines. There is also the factor of time. Hui culture developed over more than a millennium; Muslims in the West have little time to create a viable indigenous culture.

In assessing the realities of the Muslim diaspora and East-West relations, there are reasons for hope as well as despair. The two possibilities should motivate disciplined work in the tradition of Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, without giving in to excessive enthusiasm or loss of hope. The universal law of opposites, which lies at the foundation of the Chinese (and Islamic) worldviews, requires sobriety and wisdom in confronting challenges. *The Book of Changes (Yi Jing/I Ching)*, an ancient Chinese classic, focuses on the law of opposites, which it expresses in the well-known symbol of the primal binaries, Yin and Yang (☯). The figure indicates that opposites (including hope and hopelessness) are forever interlinked and mixed by their very nature. They can never occur in complete isolation, and each binary necessarily gives birth to its opposite. What gives us hope brings the potential of hopelessness; what leads to our despair is also a reason for hope.²² Above all, as Abdal Hakim Murad affirms, we must always rest assured that “history is in good hands.”²³

It would seem that finding common ground between Western and Islamic civilizations should come more naturally than the synthesis that the Hui created between Islam and the non-Abrahamic legacies of China. Unlike China, Islam was never far away from the West. It was just to the south and east of Europe and, in general, as much a part of the geographic west as its European counterpart. Both Western and Islamic civilizations were rooted in Abrahamic values and beliefs. They shared parallel histories and

were equally indebted to Greco-Roman civilization. Both civilizations cultivated science, mathematics, and philosophy. Even humanism—the central idea of modern Western civilization—emerged first in the Islamic world, as did the university system, the doctoral degree, and academic freedom.²⁴ As Richard Eaton observes, geographically and in terms of beliefs and values, Islam was never alien to the West but too close for comfort. It was proximity, similarity, and conflicting geo-political interests—not irreconcilable differences—that turned the two sister civilizations into rivals.²⁵

Islam in China has left a unique legacy of cultural accomplishment that is as valuable today as ever. It demonstrates the potential resourcefulness of Islam to live in harmony with widely divergent civilizations. It sets a standard of excellence in a globalistic world in the quest for true pluralism based on mutual understanding and interests. As in the past, Chinese civilization remains a valuable destination in this search, and the historical legacy of the Hui people constitutes an instructive example of the unique wisdom still to be found in China.

George Makdisi hoped it would be possible in the context of the modern world for the West and the Muslim world to discover their common values and draw on the best parts of our shared history and not the worst:

From “borrower” in the Middle Ages, the West became “lender” in modern times, lending to Islam what the latter had long forgotten as its own home-grown product.... Thus not only have the East and West “met”; they have acted, reacted and interacted, in the past, as in the present, and, with mutual understanding and goodwill, may well continue to do so far into the future with benefit to both sides.²⁶

China’s successful relationship with Islam for more than a millennium should inspire the Western and Islamic worlds to overcome their differences, find

a remedy for their historical amnesia, and overcome the reciprocal incoherence that keeps them apart. Perhaps, in this light, they can finally achieve a harmonious coexistence as profound as that of China and its indigenous Muslims.

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Footnotes

1. Allès, *Musulmans de Chine*, 9.
2. The official census of 1990 estimated the Hui to number about nine million; non-official estimates often put their numbers several times that large. The actual size of the Hui community is difficult to determine because of political obstacles, the wide distribution of the population, and the difficulty of distinguishing them from the various ethnicities—Han and other—among whom they live.
3. While the authenticity of the Hadith's reference to China is open to questions, its reference to the obligation of seeking knowledge is not. Al-Bayhaqi, a famous transmitter of Prophetic Traditions (Hadith), transmits the report on the authority of the Companion Anas ibn Malik in the form cited. Famous Hadith scholars like al-Khatib al-Baghdadi and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr also transmit it. Traditional Muslim scholars generally regarded the Tradition as weak or fabricated. However, it is so frequently transmitted and by such a variety of chains of transmission that some scholars held it to be acceptable (*hasan*).
4. Mees, *Die Hui*, 45.
5. Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 99-100.
6. Imke Mees, *Die Hui: Eine moslemische Minderheit*, 11-12.
7. See Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, "The World System in the Thirteenth Century."
8. "Hegemonic discourse" is a post-modernist term. "Discourse" is the way we speak or write about something. It draws attention to what speakers and writers—or those who influence them—consider important. Discourse becomes "hegemonic" when it manipulates reality and creates basic givens that cannot be questioned. Patriarchy and gender discrimination, for example, are rooted in various types of hegemonic discourse. Hegemonic discourse empowers those who control and ascribe to it, while disempowering critics or even removing the possibility of criticism. To question the basic suppositions of a hegemonic discourse once they become embedded in a culture sounds so absurd and foolish that even critical voices find it difficult to speak out. See James Atherton, *Tools: Theory of Theory*.
9. See Umar Abd-Allah, "Islam and the Cultural Imperative."
10. Le Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, 2.
11. Transmitted with a sound chain of narrators in *Sunan Abi Dawud*; a similar Tradition with slightly different wording occurs in *Sahih Muslim*.
12. *Sahih al-Bukhari*.
13. *Sahih Muslim*.
14. See Cary F. Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*; W. A. Cornaby, "God (Chinese)."
15. See Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 7-15.
16. Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 21, 45.
17. Tu Weiming, "Forward," xi.
18. Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 84-85.

19. Ibid., *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 25.
20. From Tu Weiming with modifications, "Forward," xii.
21. See Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China*, xiii, 7, 99-102, 117.
22. See James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China: The I Ching*, xix-xx, 2; Cary Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 298, 376. W. A. Cornaby, "God (Chinese)," 6: 272-274.
23. Abdal Hakim Murad, "Contentions," first contention.
24. George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism and Classical Islam and the Christian West*, 22-23, 26-28, 54, 60-61; ibid., *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, 224-240.
25. Richard M. Eaton, "Islamic History as Global History," 1-2.
26. George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 291.



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